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ABSTRACT

On April 10, 1994, The Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University's School of Education sponsored its third conference on the impact of the famous "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka" decision. Fourteen discussion groups analyzed the following questions: What was the promise of "Brown," and has that promise been fulfilled? Discussion groups explored the most efficacious strategies for achieving the promise of "Brown" in the present context. They also examined the more fundamental question of whether the "Brown" decision had been the giant step forward that most civil rights leaders a generation earlier had assumed it would be. This document summarizes the major points raised by the discussion groups, including those that pertained to other factors of racism: continued segregation, voluntary segregation on the part of blacks, integration versus quality education, the multicultural movement, tracking as the most recent form of segregation, local school financing, and the movement away from commitment to social programs of the 1960s. The issues provoked heated disagreements among participants as well as consensus in some areas. (LMI)

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THE PROMISE OF *BROWN*: Has It Been Fulfilled?

Donald Johnson

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THE PROMISE OF *BROWN*:

HAS IT BEEN FULFILLED?

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This and all Metro Center publications are produced under the supervision of Dr. LaRuth Gray, Associate Director.

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An Open Discussion at the Brown + Forty Conference
(from l. to r.: ***Andrew Billingsley****, Professor and Chair, Department of Family Studies, University of Maryland;* ***Haywood Burns****, Dean, CUNY Law School; and* ***Honorable Andrew Young****, Current Co-Chairman of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, former United States Ambassador to the United Nations.)*

Foreword

We often attend conferences that are intellectually stimulating, thought-provoking, exciting, and energizing. We listen to speakers considered experts in their fields. While we learn a lot, we don't always agree and we don't always have the opportunity to ask questions or relate our own experiences. We go home and reflect without the chance to work with and incorporate what we have learned.

To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the *Brown* vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision, Dr. LaMar P. Miller, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education and Conference Planner, envisioned a "working conference" which afforded its participants the opportunity to think, reflect, probe, and discuss their views with others who share their concern and passion for the subject matter.

The result, "*Brown* + Forty: The Promise," was a great success. Conversations were thoughtful, probing, and enlightening. Participants reported that they left with a sense that the agenda of *Brown* could be advanced.

Dr. Donald Johnson, Director of the International Education Program of the School of Education at New York University took the conference one step further. He reviewed, dissected, analyzed, and explored the implications of the notes from the conference's working discussions to compose this monograph.

The work seeks to document the contributions made by conference participants while providing new points of departure for continued disucssions on "The Promise of *Brown*."

LaRuth H. Gray
Conference Coordinator
and Associate Director
Metro Center

(from l. to r.: ***Andrew Billingsley****, Professor and Chair, Department of Family Studies, University of Maryland; Conference Facilitators* ***Roxanna Anderson-Scott****, Director of Support Services, School of Education and* ***Lindsay Wright****, Assistant Dean, School of Education; and* ***Patricia Carey****, Associate Dean, School of Education, New York University.)*

Introduction

On April 10th, 1994, The Metropolitan Center for Urban Education (Metro Center) at New York University's School of Education sponsored its third conference on the impact of the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. The Metro Center has commemorated the Supreme Court's landmark decision at its twentieth, thirtieth, and fortieth anniversaries with conferences that look back on the legacies of *Brown*, assess the present state of integration, and try to discern important trends in race relations in American society. The 1994 conference, like its predecessor, was packed with stimulating talks, panel discussions, and recollections of those who played seminal roles in bringing about the landmark decision. The 1994 conference included civil rights leaders, lawyers, educators, grassroots organizers, and major leaders of the movement in the 1950s.

At the fortieth anniversary conference, the more than 160 in attendance divided into fourteen smaller groups to analyze the proceedings. Over a two day period these groups were asked to discuss several common questions including: What is your sense of what the promise of *Brown* was, and has that promise been fulfilled? Is *Brown* still the best perspective from which to examine the issue of racial integration or are there other lenses? Where do we go now to achieve the promise? There was an extensive range of discussion, not only on the most efficacious strategies for achieving the promise of *Brown* in the present context, but over the more fundamental question of whether the *Brown* decision had, in fact, been the giant step forward that most civil rights leaders a generation earlier had assumed it would be.

As the various groups began their exchanges of ideas, the discussants mentioned the new social and political realities of the 1990s, and it became immediately apparent that new social factors had to be taken seriously in any contemporary discussion of the problem of racism. Issues in the changed context the discussion groups frequently cited included such factors as continued segregation, voluntary segregation on the part of Blacks, integration versus quality education, the multicultural movement, tracking as the most recent form of segregation, the vexing problem of local school financing, and the movement away from commitment to social programs of the 1960s by the Reagan and Bush administrations. These issues produced heated disagreements among the members of each group and among the fourteen groups in general. However, there were areas of remarkable consensus among the participants as well. What follows is a summary discussion of the major points raised by the fourteen discussion groups.

What was the Promise of *Brown*? Has that Promise been Fulfilled?

Most discussants seemed to agree that there had been a euphoric feeling in the 1960s and a romantic sense that perhaps *Brown* had achieved everything rather than viewing the landmark decision as the beginning of a long process that would expand from the issue of school integration to embrace the entire nexus of racism. The mood of the present gathering was quite sober.

Most participants concurred with the findings of one group that, "The promise of *Brown* was the elimination of a legally enforced dual system of education; in this sense, the promise had been fulfilled. The decision did end the legal basis for a twofold educational system, but the promise, as it was popularly understood at the time, was that the historic decision would dismantle the whole system of segregation and second-class status for Blacks. These expectations have not been met." The great gap in status between Blacks and whites indicates the enduring shortcomings of the promise of *Brown*.

Even in instances where schools have been structurally integrated in accordance with *Brown*, the equal treatment of each person in the classroom has not been achieved nor has the pervasive presence of racism in the schools, as well as in the larger society, been replaced by the prevailing sense of racial equality that many people assumed *Brown* would bring about. One participant reminded his discussion group that when analyzing *Brown* we must distinguish between the issue of legal segregation, which was indeed ended by *Brown*, and the ongoing implementation of the precedents

established by the *Brown* case, which are being fought daily in the struggle to achieve genuine racial equality. It is the latter to which the nation has failed to respond adequately.

One insightful participant in the small group discussions explained that, "The framers of *Brown*, and other partisans, perhaps mistakenly thought that equal opportunity would come automatically with desegregation. Sadly however, American schools, especially in the largest northern cities, are more segregated now than they were in the immediate aftermath of the *Brown* decision. Moreover, within many desegregated schools, black students often suffer a form of internal segregation through the practice of tracking." Some felt that educationally many African-American children were perhaps worse off now than in 1965. These developments were decidedly not what the architects of *Brown* could possibly have imagined would happen four decades after their great legal victory.

Perhaps a majority of the discussants felt that the vision provided by *Brown* is still a necessary moral force even in the context of contemporary society when there seems to be little national consensus on how to address dozens of major social problems. As one discussion group concluded on the question of the promise of *Brown*, "We must get a consensus on the vision of *Brown* and what it meant and keep to that vision and communicate that vision whenever possible. We should use it as a criterion and the underlying principle for federal, state, and local policy and setting social priorities."

There was, among most discussion groups, an overwhelming feeling that most Americans are in a state of denial on the continuing and pervasive racism that infuses our society and that many Americans feel the problem had been finally solved with *Brown* when, in reality, it was only the beginning. One participant argued that, "To achieve the

promise of *Brown* as a vehicle for the genuine racial equality would require nothing less than a revolution in racial attitudes by teachers and the public at large. As a harbinger of a national consensus on racial equality, *Brown* has not fulfilled its promise."

Almost all participants thought that *Brown*, as precedent making as it was in 1954, is now one of many perspectives on race, integration, and social equality. *Brown* was designed to provide equal access to educational opportunity; the debate on how to achieve the results of racial equality remains as evasive as ever. Beyond the absence of societal attitudes of racial equality, there remains a decidedly unequal access to the resources that would provide quality education even in racially segregated schools, with the economically poorer students of the inner cities most penalized. In addition, several discussion groups concluded, the *Brown* decision never defined what equal educational opportunity really meant, leaving the legal profession, educators, and civil rights activists, since 1954, to explore a variety of avenues that might lead to greater racial equality.

There was also a general consensus among a majority of discussion groups that litigation had gone about as far as it could to promote equality of education and that educators and civil rights activists must now develop radically different programs and approaches for inner city schools where so-called minority students are the overwhelming majority. Those who represented the legal profession tended to agree with this assessment, reporting that cases opposed to systematic tracking now constitute their major legal approach to bring about quality education for black students.

A majority of the groups agreed that the issues of racial

justice are more complex now, and accordingly other perspectives must be joined with the overriding issue of integration as a final objective in the society. At present about 40% of the nation's black Americans are in the middle class, and many law schools, business schools, and elite private schools are enrolling more minorities than ever before. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are increasingly powerful motivations of many American communities, and race is no longer the sole focus in building a multicultural society. Many groups working for issues such as bilingual education, gay and lesbian rights, women's rights and the more limited goals of various ethnic groups are contending for public attention and financial support. Moreover, most of these interest groups maintain strong lobbies, all of which are competing for increasingly scarce public resources.

One problem several of the discussion groups pointed out was that *Brown* focused entirely on access to education. However, in American society the context for racial segregation is far more complex and widespread. Education is tied to local financing of schools which in turn is tied inextricably to housing patterns which are in turn based on income which depends on access to jobs. The net result of this vicious circle is that Blacks, having been barred from the economic and social mainstream, bear a disproportionate burden of poverty. If schools are to be a cure for poverty, they must be properly and equally funded; this cannot be done within the existing system of school financing, because predominantly black schools are often located in the poorest parts of cities that have the smallest tax base due to white flight to the suburbs. The growing underclass is increasingly dependent on outside help in order even to begin to prepare for a productive life. In this situation public money seems to be the key element in all programs geared to support inner city students. Furthermore, social

services must now provide the support which was once given by stronger families, churches and other voluntary associations.

As one participant noted, "*Brown* was necessary to force what would not have been done voluntarily, but now the issue of school effectiveness must be dealt with, and in that sense the promise remains unfulfilled." Many believed that the *Brown* decision in 1954 may also have been somewhat in front of American popular opinion. Even though it laid the foundation for the 1965 Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts and the 1968 Equal Housing act, many Americans, in their hearts not free of the accumulated values socialized by centuries of racism, continue to resist the implementation of these and other legislative decisions and court rulings. As one group recorded in its final report, "Despite the promise of *Brown*, the nation remains, in many ways, as segregated as it was in 1954; to bring justice in a broad sense, it has failed." Every one of the fourteen small discussion groups agreed that "American society remains anchored in racism." One participant observed that, "Even though we have changed our more blatant public rhetoric about race, there are so many code terms for racism. Free choice, free market, local control, voluntarism, neighborhood schools, quality schools, etc."

Even with the great criticism and frequent expression of disillusionment with the state of American race relations, most participants in the fourteen discussion groups still regarded *Brown* as a genuinely path-breaking decision. Most groups agreed, however, that the lack of political will and a social commitment to integration are the reasons for the glacial pace of the implementation of the promise of *Brown*.

Continued Segregation, Voluntary Segregation, and Quality Education

Achieving the goal of genuinely integrated schools has proven illusive. The discussion groups seemed to agree that most civil rights leaders of the *Brown* era probably overestimated the good will of the society and the people's willingness to tear down all the barriers of segregation. The nation's history since *Brown* suggests that a large number of Americans tend to support racial equality more in the abstract than in their daily lives. In the subsequent decades, as Blacks moved to the cities, whites moved out to the suburbs or sent their children to private and parochial schools. White flight was a mortal blow to the prospect of school integration in the nation's largest cities. White resistance to major integration efforts was made manifest in the rage over busing during the 1970s and in the aftermath of court mandated orders to integrate urban systems such as in Boston in the 1970s. The large urban schools of the north are more segregated now than they were in 1954. It is a cruel irony that schools are more segregated in New York and New Jersey than in Alabama and Mississippi. Throughout the nation 66 percent of all black children are enrolled in segregated schools, and in cities like New York the percentage is well over 70 percent.

According to several group reports, increasingly, many Americans believe schools are failing, especially inner city schools. Certainly violence and disorder in these schools are major concerns of teachers, administrators, and students. Unfortunately for the cause of integration, many people associate the image of pathological and dysfunctional inner city schools with the issue of race.

Growing out of the recognition that many urban schools are *de facto* segregated, several of the discussion groups hotly debated the efficacy of integration as the major immediate goal. Some of the participants argued that in view of the structural racial segregation of the schools, the overriding issue is not integration but providing quality education for black students. One panelist noted, "Integrated education may not have been the key factor that would insure the equality of education." Unlike discussions at the previous *Brown* conference, at this fortieth anniversary meeting there was an apparent split between the notables in attendance who had worked so hard to achieve the *Brown* decision and some of the younger civil rights activists who face complex and often overwhelming problems in the large cities of the nation where they daily witness the destructive effects of poor housing, inadequate health support and inferior education. A large number of the younger participants felt that quality education was a far more important immediate goal than integrated schooling for its own sake.

One discussion group concluded that the issue of quality education "was not substantially addressed by *Brown*." Many of the other groups addressed the same issue, and one group's summary asked, "Is it possible that a quality education in the segregated inner city schools of the nation is a more compelling goal than integration which was thought to bring with it quality education?" Although this issue, more than any other, tended to spark the most disagreement in many of the small groups, many participants thought seeking quality education should come before spending energy and resources on integration.

A few very vocal participants insisted that integration had actually set back quality education for African-Americans because the process of integration was so fraught with

hostility and the noble experiment, "required black youngsters to bear too much of the social burden implicit in integrating a dual school system." As one remedy for the injuries to black youngsters that accompanied the struggle for integration, two school board members from Columbus, Ohio vehemently argued for the development of experimental all-black schools because, as they perceived the process, the African-American students had been asked, as a result of the *Brown* decision, to carry the entire burden of integration. According to this view, the young black students usually have to endure the prejudice they encounter in much the same way that Jackie Robinson was called upon to respond to white racism in his first year as professional baseball's first black player. Only recently have educators become aware of the enormous burdens that young African-Americans who have integrated previously all-white schools have had to endure. This daunting task, they suggested, has undermined the very possibility of black students obtaining a quality education.

Many of the groups discussed the issue of self-selected racial segregation. In colleges from Oberlin to Cornell, African-Americans, among other cultural groups, often opt for racially homogenous dormitories, while in many high schools minority students voluntarily organize and socialize largely within their own communities. Although Dr. Kenneth Clark, one of the architects of the *Brown* arguments assailing the effects of racial segregation, is now one of the group bringing suit against the Cornell practice of voluntary ethnically and racially separate housing, many participants argued that voluntary segregation is not really segregation. However, on the question of all-black, Afrocentric schools, there was much disagreement. Among those who championed quality education over integration, some proposed that all-black schools, especially all-black schools for young males, would actually improve self image and foster greater

achievement than integrated schools could offer in the present climate of racism. As part of the rationale for all-black public schools, especially for young males, one participant stated that, "We continue to blame the victims of racial segregation, the kids. Teachers and administrators call them undisciplined, unmotivated and uninterested."

Many strongly felt voluntary racially segregated schools were consistent with our free and open system of education. After all, one participant argued, "Catholic schools have done this for years, and they carry no stigma." Another discussant suggested, "The need for these schools is ample evidence for the failure of the public schools to bring about integration. Schools may be causing the problem of racial segregation by the way they treat black students." Others were saddened at the loss of some excellent programs in some of the formerly all-black schools. One participant remembered that, "Even in the earlier days of integration in places like Nashville, Tennessee, black children had to give up some valuable services and an enriched curriculum in order to bear the major weight of integrating the schools there."

While a modified return to the ideal of "separate but equal" formed one end of a very long spectrum of opinion, the zeal with which this position was put forward, and the often accompanying bitterness that punctuated the analysis of many inner city schools and their failure to teach black students successfully, suggested a major change in the goals and strategies for the contemporary civil rights movement. Participants like Judge Robert Carter and lawyers who had argued some of the original integration cases (featured speakers at the conference,) were adamantly against any return to segregation and still saw integration as the best moral, political, and social goal for the nation. However, as participants such as Ms. Sharlene Morgan, a school board

member from Columbus, Ohio, explained their feelings on how all-black schools for young males were a vital necessity, it was evident that many saw all-black high schools as one worthy experiment in how to promote the self confidence among young black males that might equip them for success in their future.

(from l. to r.: ***Honorable Andrew Young****; unidentified;* ***Sharisa E. Dulberg****, Administrator, Intercultural Relations/Multicultural Education, New York State Education Department; Conference Facilitator* ***Joshua Smith, Professor, Department of Administration, Leadership, and Technology, School of Education, New York University****; and* ***Frank Owens****, Supervisor of Special Education, San Francisco Unified School District.)*

The New Context for Racial Equality

Many features of the social context that informed the *Brown* era of the 1960s have changed greatly in the 1990s. Despite the reality of the continuing presence of racism in American society, few could deny that one major success of the reform movement ushered in by the *Brown* decision has been the rapid expansion of the African-American middle class. By 1990 some 40% of the black adult population had entered the middle class. In no small measure this dramatic change was due to the opening of doors throughout the society in the 1960s, particularly during the years of the Great Society under Lyndon Johnson. From 1964 through the early 1970s colleges and professional schools, especially in law and business, actively recruited black students, and these graduates, by the 1980s, were taking their place in elite law firms, corporations, and the other professions.

On the surface it would seem that one of the great successes of the past years of integration is the rise of the black middle class and its positive precedent for young African-American students. However, the new leaders are no longer the charismatic icons of mass marches and powerful oratory. The new black leaders are, in many ways, not so different from their white counterparts and have found their niche in national politics, where forty African-American members serve in the House of Representatives, in local politics, in filmmaking, in business, and other pursuits of average Americans. Often members of the black middle class are concerned with the same daily issues as most middle class Americans: What private school would be best for their children, where to spend a vacation and what kind of car to buy. The new generation of leaders are very different from leaders in the days of Martin Luther

King and Malcom X. In the present culture, black leaders are, outwardly at least, far more mainstream than ever before, and because of this historic change, many of their fellow African-Americans find them dull in comparison to the older generation of charismatic civil rights pioneers.

In the days of Martin Luther King and a movement united by a common opposition to segregation, few activists predicted or fully appreciated the role that class divisions would play in the civil rights effort of the 1990s. One of the unforeseen consequences of the rise of the black middle class has been a major split between the black bourgeoisie and the inner city underclass left in the wake of the new mobility. Many in the successful black middle class physically have left the inner cities, as their white counterparts have historically done, often leaving large communities of urban African-Americans far less rich in leadership than during the height of segregation. In addition, the expanding middle class has tended, for a variety of reasons, to distance itself from a growing underclass whose members sometimes see themselves as abandoned by those whom they feel should be providing the most help and leadership.

Not only have the class divisions heightened the plight of the inner city African-Americans who have not benefited very much from the civil rights movement, those who have gained the most advantage from programs such as affirmative action, higher education fellowships and more positive changes in hiring practices, have often found themselves disillusioned in the midst of the very outward trappings of American success that they have earned. W.E.B. DuBois talked earlier in this century about the "talented tenth," black people who should be ready to enter the mainstream of society when the walls of segregation finally came down. But now, years after those legal walls have come down, the middle class Blacks who were indeed not only "ready" but

who actually took their place in all sectors of American public life, still suffer discrimination in housing, at the hands of police, and in hiring practices. Many Blacks who have gained admission to the middle class remain profoundly disillusioned. As the scholar Henry Louis Gates has observed, "The promise [of *Brown*] has turned into a nightmare for many who are now in the black middle class." The philosopher Cornell West recalled in Race Matters that one semester, while he was teaching at Yale and commuting to Dartmouth once a week for a lecture series, he was routinely stopped by the state police and searched because they believed he was trafficking in drugs. Hardly an African-American professional has escaped encounters with a policeman, security guard, or pedestrian who nervously crosses the street as he approaches, all responses based solely on race. Consequently, Blacks may want to live in predominantly black suburban or predominantly middle class neighborhoods where they feel more at home and can avoid the persistent hassle of daily confrontations with the consequences of racism.

Several groups discussed the agony of the black middle class, many of whom have been disillusioned by their own life experiences with integration, and are now further anguished over the proper response to the inner city underclass of Blacks, seemingly caught in a hopeless existence of poverty, deteriorating neighborhoods and inferior education. Many in the black middle class, caught in the nexus of continued racism on one hand and trying to determine a socially viable response to the overwhelming problems of the inner city, live in a paradoxical world filled with contradictions and tension.

Racism in the Context of the New Multiculturalism

Given the rising multicultural consciousness of the last decade, many discussants agreed that the cultural assumptions of the 1950s that informed the *Brown* case now seem remarkably naive. When the court handed down the landmark decision, many Americans believed America was a culture-free society in which individual effort and mobility were the major determinants of achieving the American dream. Both the arguments leading up to the 1954 decision and the final ruling assumed individualism was the basis for both American law and culture. What African-Americans were guaranteed by the *Brown* decision was legal access to public schools, and the implication of that philosophy was that if permitted to do so, Blacks would gladly enter mainstream society and willingly accept the existing rules of the dominant culture. The black students who first integrated previously all-white schools, even though they represented a larger group, moved through the doors as individuals who were supposed to be given the same personal opportunities as other students. Increasingly, Americans are realizing that the historic ideology of individualism was not always practiced and that group loyalty has been and remains an important ingredient of what it means to be an "American." More significantly, if for centuries the dominant culture has treated Blacks as a group and not as separate individuals, how could a single court decision suddenly transform the historic legacy of racism based on group membership into a new consciousness of Blacks as individuals? Paradoxically, in an age where many scholars and social commentators see American culture moving increasingly toward individualism, the

historic categorization of Blacks as a race continues. The contradiction between the culture of individualism and the classification of Blacks as a race did not escape several of the discussion groups.

Several participants suggested that one consequence of the emphasis on individualism, at least for the civil rights movement, is the great difficulty that activists are having drawing upon an organic sense of community. It is hard to organize people not directly involved in a pressure group for larger issues of common social justice. We all seem to want individual rights and special privileges for our own small groups. The nature of political lobbying has become so parochial and focuses on special interests such as senior citizens, specific ethnic groups and economic interests that we have few broad based coalitions working for social change. Daily we grow more isolated by identifying with "primordial groups" and by allowing our political discourse increasingly to appeal to ethnic, religious, and racial group loyalties. The federal policy of categorical grants, one group argued, exacerbates this tendency by pitting racial, ethnic and linguistic groups against one another in pursuit of ever more scarce public resources.

Most groups agreed that coalition building is much more difficult now than it was when the *Brown* decision was handed down. One discussion group observed that people such as retirees, teachers, gays and lesbians, and numerous ethnic communities, now tend to organize around very specific goals seeking advantages for their own members. The multicultural movement now includes, besides African-Americans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Mexican, Dominican, Native and countless other "Americans." These small groups are focusing "more and more on their own parochial concerns without much regard for the larger issues of social justice."

Many group participants expressed a growing feeling among various groups that the general ethnic and racial classifications commonly used by government are no longer functional. Moreover, these generalized cultural and racial terms mask a growing class division among all cultural groups in the country, and the large spectrum of political and religious differences among members of these supposed monolithic group designations. Latino does not really describe a common culture that includes Dominicans, Mexicans, Cubans and Peruvians. Neither perhaps is black an all-inclusive term for Haitians, Jamaicans, Nigerians and African-Americans born and raised in the United States. Yet the persistent force of racism seems to disallow the conceptualizing of "black" into smaller ethnic components. Historically we have been taught to think of Europeans who came to the United States as Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, German, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, etc. As the philosopher Cornell West has pointed out, if Blacks could ever become a collection of ethnic groups similar to Europeans, it would "take us a long way away from simplistic racial categories of black and white."

Besides pointing out the need for more adequate, smaller, categorizations, participants noted that a large number of ethnic groups were placing new emphasis on asserting their cultural roots, earning recognition for their contributions to the general culture, and fighting for a place for themselves in the school curriculum, political appointments and employment. African-Americans now find themselves, even though they constitute the largest ethnic group and have suffered the harshest consequences of racism, only one of the many groups seeking advantage in the larger system. The plight of Blacks may have been further damaged by the new phenomena because most of the immigrant groups identify themselves as "ethnic" while at the same time internalizing the traditional pattern of

racial prejudice against Blacks. It is a tragic irony that many new immigrant groups seek acceptance in the social system by following the precedent of so many others in attempting to distance themselves from Blacks.

Honorable Constance Baker Motley *(right)* **with Two of Her Law Clerks**

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Changing Commitment of Government and Society

Most of the groups concurred that not only have divisions among various ethnic groups changed the way strategies for racial equality are being forged, but the nature of the national consciousness reflected in the political process has dramatically altered since the historic *Brown* decision. Many of the discussion groups, sensing this major change in the political mood, discussed various components of the new context. There was a pervasive opinion among the fourteen discussion groups that the pendulum of "Great Society" reform has now swung back to a more conservative mood throughout the country. Most groups agreed that the political will to sustain integration has waned since the Johnson presidency and the days of *Brown*. Presidents from Nixon through Carter, Reagan, Bush, and even Clinton, have increasingly moved issues of social justice to the bottom of the public agenda. Some like Bush in 1988 even openly used race fear as an important element in his presidential election, and many candidates in the 1994 fall congressional elections also used negative racial symbols in their campaign ads and literature.

Several groups' summaries suggested that political leaders and more conservative scholars who play on the national fears associated with the move toward multiculturalism, contribute, however unintentionally, to the deterioration of already over-extended social services in the inner city schools. Scholars such as Arthur Schlesinger, and political leaders such as William Bennett, attack multiculturalism as divisive and undermining the traditional American consensus on individual responsibility. The

dust jacket on Schlesinger's Disuniting America graphically suggests that the stripes falling from the American flag, intended to represent the disintegration of a common American culture, is largely the work of brown and black peoples. Many of the opponents of multicultural education forcefully argue that all students, no matter their cultural or racial affiliation, must be socialized into a perceived common American culture rooted in the founding documents of the political system. Such an approach often undermines sincere efforts by curriculum reformers to include the history and culture of all the groups who helped build the nation. One recent example of the deep antagonism to this inclusive approach is the continuing attack on the new Standards for U.S. History, which critics such as Lynne Cheney claim give too much attention to Blacks, women, and Native Americans at the expense of white males. By alleging that many inner city schools are hotbeds of Afrocentrism and multiculturalism, these critics contibute to the sense that these schools are beyond salvation and are not serving the purposes of socializing patriotism and a common national identity.

Participants in the small groups also tended to agree that the social support systems that were taken for granted in the 1950s and 60s are no longer as viable now. In an age the budget constraints at all levels of government coupled with an eroding cultural support system, those who now most need help are often the last to receive it. According to one group's findings, young urban students in earlier decades could count on local organizations like the YM-YWCA; the church was a more significant force in young lives, and the family was a much stronger institution than it is in the 1990s when more than a quarter of all children and half of all young black children are being raised in single parent families. Unfortunately, at the very time in history when young people need the most support from govern-

ment and voluntary services, the present political mood of the national government, particularly in Congress, seeks further to diminish federal support for programs aimed at improving the opportunities for inner city young people.

Honorable Andrew Young Talks with Conference Facilitator Charles I. Rankin *(Director, Midwest Desegregation Center, Kansas State University)*

Changed Attitude Toward the Role of Law

At this conference, more than at the previous commemorative gatherings on the *Brown* case, there was a great deal of tension between the lawyers and many of the educators and local activists. As one participant explained, "Law simply has taken too long, and things have not really improved since *Brown*." There was a general feeling among the many non-lawyers in the various groups that legal remedies are by nature slow and time consuming and that other areas within the society are now more appropriate foci for both racial integration and improving school quality for minority students. As one participant noted, "The legal route has its limitations, and we have to find other ways to achieve equality."

Many of the lawyers present attested to the fact that the make-up of the Supreme Court in the 1980s did not encourage path-breaking civil rights cases, so perhaps it is not surprising that the emphasis on legal remedies that was the cornerstone of the civil rights movement leading up to *Brown* and which shaped racial integration strategies in the 1960s, faded drastically in the 1980s. The major arena for desegregation cases is now the various state court systems and, of course, states vary greatly in their commitment to civil rights.

Several lawyers admitted that they could now draw upon very few innovative approaches in their legal arsenals that could lead to new and dramatic types of cases. The one new area of cases are those against academic tracking. The system of tracking became a regular feature of the comprehensive high school created during the Progressive Era.

According to the philosophy that informed those new high schools, each student would be evaluated for native intelligence and achievement to determine if he or she was best suited for the world of manual labor, for service in the offices of rising industry, or should be encouraged to go on to liberal arts colleges. As recent histories of the tracking of the comprehensive high schools demonstrate, students from the new immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe, from rural farming communities and the urban poor were routinely tracked into industrial arts and business curricula. Until recent decades few black youngsters got as far as high school, and in the south all were educated in segregated schools. The few black students who attended northern urban high schools during the first half of this century were also "segregated" by being tracked into programs that prepared them for menial service jobs.

Many of the members of various discussion groups agreed that this historic practice of tracking, as well as the racial presuppositions underlying the original basis for tracking, persist within seemingly integrated schools, often resulting in a continued pattern of segregation. A large number of discussants cited tracking, and "dumping" black children into special education classes, as the major new form of racial segregation in the schools. Many discussants cited tracking and special education programs as a way of placing minority students in dead-end classes. At this point, according to one NAACP lawyer, the largest category of school civil rights cases involves litigation against tracking.

The Debate over National Standards, Tracking, and Special Education: The New Forms of Segregation.

As an outgrowth of the discussion on tracking, many discussants in the small groups were very concerned over how the major push toward national and state standards and the growing concern with student achievement all over the nation would affect African-American students. The Clinton administration's plan for "Goals 2000," an over-all plan to improve American education, continues the Bush administration's commitment to a more comprehensive system of national standards aimed to make American students "world class." In the summer and fall of 1994 the Department of Education announced the publication of several subject area standards including geography, civics and U.S. and world history. These standards, while not legally binding on the states, are expected to serve as a form of moral persuasion and encourage state and local education departments to upgrade their educational systems on a voluntary basis. Since the original plan to create a system of national assessment has been abandoned and there will be no system of national testing, local and state systems must judge for themselves the success of their students.

Many participants in the fourteen discussion groups were genuinely ambivalent about the move to national and state standards. With all the public discussion of national standards, many discussants argued that there is a "need to disaggregate kids and recognize differential needs." These critics considered "the idea of 'standards' [as] potentially dangerous, given the fact that so many students are pre-

vented from competing on an equal basis." On the other hand many discussants favored uniform standards as long as there was equal support for all students to achieve them.

Some members of the various discussion groups felt we must not fall into the trap of thinking higher educational standards are necessarily bad for African-Americans. They argued standards are good for all students, and that what we need is support so that all students have a chance to achieve those standards. Many welcomed the move to excellence provided some guarantees of equal funding and support for all students was forthcoming. However, others believed many inner city students would be condemned to failure by the proposed standards.

As they reviewed the debate over national standards, the participants called for accountability for administrators and teachers as well as for students. As one group suggested, "Administrators must be held accountable for student outcomes and quality teachers even if it takes time and risks not being popular. Most administrators know who their weak and marginal teachers are, but they don't take responsibility for weeding them out." Another concrete suggestion from one small group was for more in-service education for local school boards. Often school boards in small towns are most concerned with budget cutting while large city school boards are frequently highly politicized and interested in patronage for various groups they represent. "How can school boards, composed of lay people," one participant asked, "learn to grasp the complexities of modern teaching and learning and work with professionals to improve the schools?"

Many discussants, in accepting the legitimacy of higher academic standards, called for national standards for teachers as well as students and insisted that the standards

movement be enlarged to include a major revamping of teaching, teacher training and student support. There was a very strong consensus among the groups that teacher quality and preparation was now the major issue if the promise of a quality education for all students is to be met. One group concluded, "In addition to learning the new knowledge that is available, teachers need more professional development in multicultural education, and teacher preparation should insist that all future teachers have experience in diverse environments." Other groups called for more field based teacher education, "including longer internships prior to permanent certification."

The expansion of standards is already one of the most explosive debates in education. If the move toward uniform excellence continues, schools must find viable alternatives to the common practice of tracking minority students into lower academic groupings and into special education classes. Certainly tracking and the movement to national standards are linked, and some resolution of the apparent conflict between the two must be addressed at all levels of educational policy.

The Need for Essential Improvement of Schooling in General

Many discussion groups expanded the debate over school standards to the larger issue of quality education in general. As one participant sagely noted, "We must not confuse school desegregation with school improvement. This may be the great myth of this meeting." During the extended discussion on how to achieve quality education, there was extended and often impassioned criticism of almost all aspects of American education as a system. During the discussions about the current state of American public schooling, a general sense of frustration was frequently expressed in statements such as, "Schools are employment opportunities for adults," "Teachers just want to hold on to their jobs," "Teachers have given up on black kids," and "Big city school systems are mostly designs for failure for black kids."

Many discussants expressed the opinion that quality education for African-American students was inevitably tied to raising the expectations and increasing the support for all students. As one focus group explained, "We must add to the issue of integration school improvements in plan and curriculum. We need to focus on a more equitable distribution of resources between rich and poor districts and schools. School districts need to do much more to attract qualified minority applicants for high level administrative positions. A richer array of special programs must be available in inner city schools." There was also near unanimity among the fourteen groups that we must now think of education in a much broader sense than in the past, and some discussants felt the whole infrastructure of education

has to be deconstructed and analyzed to find more sophisticated ways to achieve racial integration on terms of equality. With the withering away of the social commitments of the Great Society programs, many Americans see the market place and privatization as the best panacea for problems from health care to education. For example, the Whittle schools offer to solve educational problems via the market place and free enterprise, Boston University has subcontracted to run the public schools in Charlestown and large corporations in many cities, such as in Baltimore, Milwaukee and Hartford, have contracted with private agencies to run schools that elected officials seem unable to reform. Several groups recommended that public education must respond to this new faith in private business to save the schools by also offering innovative ideas for improving education. One suggestion was that schools should cooperate and form networks with other educational institutions such as religious institutions, community based organizations, social agencies, businesses, parents and peer groups.

What Should be Done Now?

Each of the fourteen small discussion groups was asked to end their deliberations by making a list of concrete suggestions that focused on providing quality education for Blacks and would lead to a more racially equal society. In order to offer a maximum number of suggestions, the conference made no attempt to evaluate these recommendations. Although participants had only two days of intensive discussions and limited time in which to synthesize and organize these ideas, each discussion group submitted a remarkably rich compilation of exiting proposals. The discussion groups generally acknowledged the changed context for school reform and tried to offer concrete suggestions best suited for the contemporary realities. As one participant stated, "We must acknowledge other factors at play as we seek to both integrate schools and foster quality education."

Facing the contemporary lack of a genuine national commitment to school integration and to improving the quality of education for minority students, most participants felt that local grassroots style political mobilization held the most promise and hoped that local examples of excellence would be replicated elsewhere. While few people doubted the extreme politicization of local schooling, they still regarded local participation as preferable to the slow legal appeals that had characterized the approach of the *Brown* era. As one group suggested, "Build small consensus from local levels upward. We now live in a decentralized political system."

Perhaps the most ubiquitous statement expressed by all discussion groups was, "We must empower parents." This

phrase seemed to echo throughout the fourteen discussion groups. Mr. James Turner described an experiment in community control presently going on in Benton Harbor, Michigan that is one of the most positive examples of empowering parents. In Benton Harbor the superintendent, Sherwin Alan, has spent a great deal of time holding meetings among parents, teachers, administrators and creative leaders from all walks of life, including the military, to discuss how to make schools answerable to those whose children are most affected. Mr. Turner reported that Superintendent Alan is empowering parents, and that 's making a significant difference in the quality of education for all students.

Extending on the many suggestions for improving grassroots' efforts at school reform, many participants called for a significant increase in collaboration among schools and other institutions. As one participant observed, "Schools can't do it all." Community based schools such as Dr. Robert Cromer's experiments in New Haven, Connecticut, and those in East Harlem in the 1940s launched by Leonard Covello, were cited as promising examples of what can be done to bring various groups interested in young people together in a concerted effort at reform. In the present context of generally deteriorating family and community support systems, it is more imperative than ever that health, education and other social services be coordinated. Students do not live in the isolated worlds of school, family, neighborhood and health. Somehow the institutions that most directly serve young people must learn how to work together in the general interests of the young people they are supposed to serve.

There are many excellent grassroots efforts going on all over the nation, but often few people beyond the immediate locality know about these projects. One concrete suggestion

was for a systematic computer network that would link those concerned with school reform for inner city students. Perhaps a bulletin board on "Internet" might lead people to attempt to replicate exiting projects. A community of like-minded educators, parents and students could readily share ideas and innovations leading to integration and quality education.

One of the sobering realities the discussion groups recognized was that, "Reform has to take place in the global economy where the gap between skilled and non-skilled is creating two social classes. The gap between the income of high school graduates versus college grads is the greatest in history. No matter what the situation on integration black kids have got to have the sophisticated skills to compete in the Global economy that is bashing labor all over the world."

A popular recommendation was the concept of redrawing school districts to bring large cities and suburban areas into a common district. Many cited the Detroit experiments in redistricting. Because of white flight to the suburbs, segregated housing patterns, and the deep hostility to busing, redrawing historic school districts is one of the few available ways that might integrate some of the now totally segregated inner city schools. A series of pie-shaped districts with the point of the triangle starting at the heart of the city and expanding outward to the surrounding suburbs is clearly one way of integrating schools without necessarily increasing the distance students traveled.

There was a general feeling that teachers expect little from all black student populations. It is all too common in many predominantly black and Latino schools for teachers to let generalized discussions of topics of passing interest substitute for real intellectual learning. There is too much

solicitation of personal opinions and psychological interest in relevance and not enough attention to achievement and knowledge for its own sake. Black students at Choate and Exeter are expected to achieve the same standards as whites, but this is decidedly not the case in most inner city schools. The consensus among the discussion groups was that black students should indeed be held to high standards and expectations of excellence. At the same time the schools must be funded at the same level as the elite suburban schools, and students must have the individualized instruction necessary to meet the high academic expectations.

If inner city schools are to be excellent, a thoroughgoing restructuring of teacher recruitment and training is imperative. As one group wrote in its summary, "Teachers come largely from the working class. They don't have the cultural background to foster integration or race sensitivity."

Because of the dominant culture of schools, several groups believed that there was usually an uneven responsibility for school integration and many argued that if the integration effort is to continue, "We must shift some of the burden of integration to the white population. The black kids have carried an impossible burden."

In this context, several participants called for a highly visible "national dialogue on race," a concerted effort to move the issue of race back onto the public agenda. As one group member suggested, "We've changed smoking habits and driving while drinking patterns, but we won't attack racism in the same way." Another group suggested that, "If we could only treat racial equality as important as the space race after Sputnik or the Gulf War or the trillions spent on the Cold War, we might actually accomplish something in this area."

Some suggested that we work within the new popularity of the market principle that seems to be sweeping the world. "Since it dictates the present discourse," one participant suggested, "why not in this new context insist that everyone must be accountable, from students to teachers and parents." This recommendation seemed to fit well with earlier observations that educators want students to meet national standards, but resisted making teachers and administrators accountable to the community and to the students. However, many of the groups wanted to structure accountability into all levels of education. As one participant stated, "If students have standards and are tested to see if they are met, teachers must also." All agreed that the teaching profession has got to take more responsibility for developing and maintaining its own standards and must develop ways to monitor those who are not meeting these standards. All professions are responsible for their own work; teachers have got to accept this reality.

Those who still champion school integration as an effective instrument for improving educational opportunities often pointed to several major issues in school reform such as school finance. As Jonathan Kozol so eloquently explained in Savage Inequalities, if Scarsdale is spending more than $15,000 per student per year and the average in Mississippi is less than $5,000 per student per year, how can children from poor states and inner city districts expect to obtain an equal education? All groups recommended new approaches to equalize school financing.

Although magnet schools, an idea intended to bring about voluntary integration because of the attractive programs that inner city schools might develop, have not been very successful in attracting white students to largely black areas of the city, many participants still thought the concept is a good idea and should not be abandoned. Many

cited the success of Park East High School in East Harlem as an example of what might happen if the so-called magnet schools really did develop excellent programs.

Various groups offered many other concrete suggestions: "Tear down the existing welfare system and create one that fosters mobility, individual responsibility and human growth," and "We must think class instead of race. Make programs class based to help all that are poor. This would help African-Americans but would help build coalitions with poor whites and Latinos and other marginalized groups." A very popular idea on reorganizing schools was: "Rethink the school as a community based institution. It should be open all day and evening and all year. Integrate the old settlement house idea into the school system where education could go on evenings and weekends."

Among other recommendations worth noting were those that addressed the total concept of American schooling created during the first years of American industrialism. One participant argued that, "We must break the old school paradigm of a mass-producing factory. We must make city schools smaller and offer a sense of community, stability and opportunity for individual attention. Remove the walls, use the whole community as a school (such as the city as a school). Use many languages. Cooperate more with business. Build holistic schools which will deal with health, social problems, diet." The promise of *Brown* is still a valid dream, but the "...methods of achieving its goal must be adapted to present realities. We need imagination and collective will more than anything."

Infusing the tone of the discussion groups and underlying the specific recommendations for improving the schools was the sense that even now, forty years after *Brown*, we

still live in an age where racism pervades the culture. It is an inescapable fact that if students are to try hard in school, they must have the promise of a real future in an increasingly skill-oriented economic system. If we continue to think of those who do not excel in school as a form of human waste, or fail to hold out genuine possibilities of success in all levels of the society for young black students, they will continue to see no real future for themselves. The social system has got to change along with any successful efforts at school reform.

In summary the fourteen groups seemed to coalesce around several conclusions.

◆ The deep-seated racism that has characterized American society from its inception is still very much a part of our collective culture. The racial attitudes of the American people remain the single greatest obstacle to full integration and equality of all peoples.

◆ The political leadership has retreated from the commitment to racial justice that emerged in the 1960s. A series of conservative presidencies has appointed new federal judges who are much less likely to challenge legal barriers and promote legal remedies for school integration.

◆ The present culture of rampant individualism and faith in consumerism as the best avenue to human happiness has fragmented earlier coalitions for a more generalized commitment to human justice in favor of more special interest politics for smaller and smaller groups. Without a more widespread support for racial integration, minorities as just another "special interest group" cannot do much by themselves to achieve it.

◆ The spirit of individualism embedded in the Reagan-

Bush socialization that government is a dangerous force in peoples' lives, means that racial integration now relies almost exclusively on the good will of average people and a policy of strict voluntarism. Government - both legislative and judicial - is no longer even a catalyst for racial integration.

◆ Reliance on legal remedies could not and has not brought about the goals of *Brown*. The means must now be more sophisticated and diffused into other institutional avenues.

◆ Striving for racial integration must not be separated from the more immediate goal of quality education for all students. As the glacial rate of integration continues, we must all work to ensure quality education in the segregated schools that are now the norm, especially in northern cities. This effort requires rethinking school funding, teaching methods, curricula and the traditional culture of schooling.

◆ There is widespread disillusionment among many who have dedicated a significant part of their lives to achieve racial integration. However, this sobering mood is no reason to retreat from the morally valid goals of social justice, even if the task is more daunting than people during the euphoric days of *Brown* expected.

Much of the frustration so readily apparent throughout the fourteen discussion groups rose out of a prevailing sense that while *Brown* offered a great dream of racial equality, and progress since *Brown* has been real, advancement toward a race-free society has been far too slow, and in many ways the plight of young black students, especially in the inner cities, is worse now than thirty years ago. The tension between the dream of racial equality and the present reality brings to mind the theologian Reinhold

Niebuhr's insight into democratic societies, when he once explained, "Hypocrisy is dishonor's complement to honor." He meant that it is better publicly to enunciate a shared commitment to justice, even if society does not live up to that promise, than to articulate unjust values which are easy to keep.

The title of this 40th anniversary commemoration of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was the "Promise of *Brown*." That term encapsulates Niebuhr's sentiments exactly. The famous case held out a promise based on a changed understanding of our racial past. It by itself could not accomplish this gigantic task of integrating a historically segregated and racist society. It did, however, hold out a glorious promise stated publicly by the highest court in the land. That promise to end racial segregation is still a noble dream. The human beings who have come to maturity since 1954 have made the history since that time. The generations now coming to maturity, both black and white, face the same challenge to carry out the goals of the thus far unkept promise. Racial segregation is, finally, a human problem effecting everyone, and it is not for the courts or schools alone to solve. As Pogo once taught us, "We have met the enemy and he is us."